

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00
USIE-00 INRE-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 IO-13
ACDA-07 SSM-03 OMB-01 TRSE-00 SY-05 A-01 OPR-02
/094 W

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O R 071517Z APR 77
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2579
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL KERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
DIA WASHDC
SECDEF WASHDC
USCINCEUR

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 2256
E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: MOPS, PFOR, SY, LE, PLO, IS
SUBJECT: FIGHTING IN SOUTH LEBANON DIMISHES

1. WEST GERMAN TELEVISION REPORTER WHO
VISITED TAIBEH FOR FIVE HOURS APRIL 6 TOLD US APRIL 7 THAT
FIGHTING BETWEEN CHRSTIANS LOYAL TO BESHIR GEMAYEL ANFD
FAVIGALEE DEFENDERS ENDED APRIL 5 WHEN ATTACK BY FORMER
ON TAIBEH REPULSED WITH HEAVY LOSSES TO ATTACKERS. SOURCE
BELIEVES CHRISTIANS MAY NOT HAVE MILITARY CAPABILITY TO
RENEW SERIOUS HOSTILITIES UNTIL THEY RECEIVE REINFORCEMENTS.
SOURCE REPORTED SYRIANS PERMITTED MATERIEL TO PASS
THROUGH ADF LINES BUT OTHERWISE DID NOT AID
DEFENDERS WITH ARTILLERY SUPPORT OR WITH FIGHTERS. END SUMMARY.

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2. WE MET APRIL 7 WITH WEST GERNAM TELEVISION NEWSMAN
WHO HAD VISITED SOUTH LEBANON PREVIOUS DAY AND HAD SPENT
FIVE HOURS IN TAIBEH, APPARENTLY A SHIITE VILLAGE
BECAUSE KAMAL ASSAD MAINTAINS SUMMER HOME THERE. SOURCE
FILMED BATTELFIELD, AND HIS PRODUCT WILL APPEARHON
GERMAN TV APRIL 7. HE MET WITH DEFENDERS, INCLUDING
LOCAL FATAH COMMANDER. SOURCE HAS SERVED IN BEIRUT FOR PAST

SEVEN YEARS AND CAME ACROSS AS AN EXPERIENCED OBSERVER OF LEBANESE POLITICAL-MILITARY SCENE.

3. SOURCE SAID CHRISTIANS ATTACKED TAIBEH APRIL 3 AND CAPTURED IT FROM LOCAL DEFENDERS, WHO HE CALIMED DID NOT FULLY REALIZE ITS STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE. HOWEVER, FOLLOWING DAY FATAH-LED FORCES COUNTERATTACKED AND REGAINED THEIR POSITIONS. CHRISTIANS RETURNED TO THE OFFENSIVE APRIL 5 AROUND 1300L, THROWING "ARMORED COMPANY" AND "INFANTRY BATTALION" INTO BATTLE. DEFENDERS ACQUITTED THEMSELVES WELL, REPULSING ATTACK AND INFLECTING RELATIVELY HEAVY LOSSES ON CHRISTIANS. SOURCE SAID THREE SHERMAG TANKS DESTROYED -- HE SAW TWO -- AND FOUR ARMORED CARS KNOCKED OUT. DEFENDERS PRODUCED ONE CHRISTIAN PRISONER WHO THEY CLAIMED WAS ONLY ONE THEY TOOK. SOURCE SAID PRISONER WAS 16 YEARS OLD AND STATED HE HAD BEEN GIVEN FOUR DAYS OF TRAINING WITH MACHINE GUN BEFORE JOINING BATTLE.

4. SOURCE SAID HIS DISCUSSIONS WITH DEFENDERS INDICATED ATTACKERS AND DEFENDERS HAD RECEIVED LITTLE SUPPORT FROM ISRAELIS AND SYRIANS RESPECTIVELY. SOURCE SAID NEAREST SYRIAN ARTILLERY POSITIONS WERE 15-18 KILOMETERS FROM TABEH. HE WAS TOLD BY DEFENDERS THAT NEITHER SYRIANARTILLERY NOR TROOPS HAD BEEN INVOLVED IN FIGHTING. SYRIANS HAD PERMITTED WEAPONS TO PASS THROUGH ADF LINES TO TABEH. FATAH COMMANDER TOLD SOURCE THAT SOME SHELLING HAD ORIGINATED IN ISRAEL, WHICH HE SAID WAS APPARENT AT NIGHT, BUT ISRAELI ARTILLERY FIRE HAD NOT BEEN MASSIVE AND ISRAELIS DID NOT LEAD AIR SUPPORT TO CHRISTIANS
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NOR DID ISRAELI TROOPS ENTER BATTLE. SOME ACCENTS MONITORED ON WALKIE-TALKIE FREQUENCIES USED BY CHRISTIANS WERE POSSIBLY ISRAELI, BUT IN GENERAL COMMANDER NOTED THAT CHRISTIANS OPERATED ON THEIR OWN USING SOME MATERIEL SUPPLIED BY ISRAELIS.

5. ACCORDING TO SOURCE, DEFENDERS CONSIST OF A) HARD-CORE FATAH TROOPERS, B) INDIVIDUAL PLA SOLDIERS EXPERIENCED IN USING SOPHISTICATED WEAPONS SUCH AS ARTILLERY AND ROCKETS, BUT NO PLA UNITS, C) INDIVIDUALS FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH AHMAD KHATIB'S LAA WHO ADDED TANKS, ARMORED CARS AND ARTILLERYQW TO DEFENSE OF TAIBEH, AND D) ABOUT 50 SNP FIGHTERS. LOCAL FATAH COMMANDER NAME "ABU JIHAD,Z ALTHOUGH HE NOT KHALIL WAZIR. FATAH PERSONNEL TOLD HIM THAT WAZIR HAD VISITED TAIBEH TO HELP ORGANIZE DEFENSES, BUT SOURCE SAID HE COULD NOT VERIFY THIS ASSERTION.

6. SOURCE STATED THAT CHRISTIAN FORCES WERE LED BY OFFICERS LOYAL TO BESHIR GEMZYXUS RATHER THAN CHAMOUNISTS. HE SAID CHRISTIANS HAVE APPROXIMATELY 1,000G

GVFOOPS IN SOUTH, 600-700 NEAR TAIBEH AND 300-400 NEAR RUMAYSH. THESE FORCES ALONE, IN HIS VIEW, ARE NOT NEARLY ENOUGH TO ESTABLISH AND DEFEND A CORDON SANITARI ALONG LEBANESE-ISRAELI BORDER, AND FATAH OFFPYERS ARE WELLWARE OF THIS. HE ALSO CLAIMED CHRISTIANS FACED ONGOING DIFFICULTIES IN BRINGING IN MEN AND SUPPLIES TO THEIR OUT-POSTS IN SOUTH. HE SAID ISRAELIS PROVIDING OBSTACLES TO TRANSPORT VIA SHIP FROM BEIRUT-JOUNIEH TO NORTH ISRAEL OF MEN AND MATERIEL. CHRISTIAN FORCES, IN HIS VIEW, ALSO SUFFER FROM LACK OF TRAINING AND HAVE NOT PROVEN THEMSELVES TO BE GOOD FIGHTERS IN SOUTH.

7. SINCE SERIOUS FIGHTING ENDED ON APRIL 5, TABEH HAS BEEN SCENE OF ARTILLERY EXCHANGES ONLY, ACCORDING TO SOURCE. TAIBEH DID NOT SUFFER MUCH DAMAGE BECAUSE MUCH OF THE FIGHTING REVOLVED AROUND "HILL NUMBER 30," LOCATED SOUTH OF TAIBEH, WHICH DOMINATES AREA STRATEGICALLY. SOURCE BELIEVES CONFIDENTIAL

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CHRISTIANS WILL NOT BE ABLE TO AMOUNT ANOTHER OFFENSIVE AGAINST TAIBEH THAT WILL HAVE ANY SERIOUS LIKELIHOOD OF ATTAINING ITS OBJECTIVES IN NEAR FUTURE, BECAUSE ATTACKERS WERE SO BADLY MAULED. HE SAID THEY WILL PROBABLY HAVE SOME EXPLAINING TO DO WITH ISRAELIS BEFORE FOLLOW-UP STRATEGY IS WORKED OUT.

8. COMMENT:

IF SOURCE'S ASSESSMENT OF CAPABILITIES OF ATTACKERS AND DEFENDERS IS ACCURATE, IT WOULD APPEAR THAT CHRISTIANS DO NOT MAINTAIN SUFFICIENT STRENGTH TO ATTAIN THEIR REPUTED OBJECTIVE OF CREATING CORDON SANITARIE IN SOUTH UNLESS ISRAELIS INCREASE LEVE OF THEIR ASXZPTANCE. FATAH-LED DEFEDNERS HAVE OBTAINED SOME REASSURNACE OF THEIR OWN ABILITY TO REPULSE CHRISTIAN ATTACKS WITHOUT CALLING FOR DIRECT ASSISTANCE FROM SYRIANS, EITHER IN TERMS OF ARTILLERY SUPPORT OR TROOPS. DANGER POINT WILL ARISE IF CHRISTIANS SUPPORTED MORE STRONGLY BY ISRAELIS TRHEATEN TO OVERRRRUN DEFENDERS POSITIONS. BARRING THIS EVENTUALITY, RELATIVE BALANCE OF FORCES IN SOUTH SUGGESTS THAT A STAND-OFF HAD BEN REACHED.
MURPHY

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